



Taking Virtual Visits to the Next Level

By Wendy Lewis

The pandemic has presented opportunities to digitalize an aesthetic surgery practice while managing patients and keeping surgeons, staff and patients safe. Consumer acceptance of virtual or video events, meetings, checkups and consults has grown exponentially and is here to stay. The normalizing of virtual visits offers ways to expand your practice beyond its four walls.

Take advantage of emerging platforms and improved virtual tools to approximate doctor to patient face-to-face interaction as a sustainable alternative to calls and in-office visits. The pluses far outweigh any minuses. These include increased efficiency, patient acceptance, greater flexibility, expanded local, regional and global reach. You can set aside time during the day, evenings, and even weekends to accommodate patient requests and your schedule.

It also provides an opportunity to screen patients before they come into the office. Virtual meetings offer a window into the patient's expectations, and may expose signs of depression or body dysmorphia which can help weed out patients you may not want in your practice.

GETTING SET UP

It is best to use a single platform for consistency, and HIPAA compliant encrypted platforms are preferable. ZOOM is a popular option because so many patients use it for work. Doxy.me, Doximity®, Facetime, Skype, Google Hangouts, Symplast® and Nextech® are also commonly used. Most free platforms offer a paid subscription option that provides some level of customization and tech services.

Conduct virtual visits in a private and quiet space with no interruptions, and in the same attire you that would normally wear for a live consultation. Treat these as an official patient visit to maintain a professional distance. As you get started, it is helpful to have a staff member standing by in case you run into trouble with the connection or set up.

Equipment required may include a video camera to record the consultation, microphone, headset, good lighting and comfortable chair. Test the device you will be using, your internet connectivity and make sure that your battery is fully charged or use a wired connection. Adjust the position or angle of the camera so



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that you can be clearly seen and test your microphone and speakers before you begin.

When starting a new patient consultation, verify name, date of birth, address, email and cell phone number in case the connection is lost. If you are meeting the patient for the first time, begin by introducing yourself and welcoming the patient to your practice. Some patients, especially older ones, may not be comfortable with technology or be able to use your platform of choice, so be prepared for a Plan B to switch to a phone call if needed. Building rapport and establishing trust can be trickier via video due to the distance factor and patients' lack of experience with this model. Maintain your professionalism and be careful not to send the wrong message.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Develop your own policies and procedures for virtual options in compliance with relevant state regulations and your malpractice carrier. Handle virtual meetings as official patient visits to be documented in the chart.

Some guidelines to consider:

- Determine pricing for consults with surgeon vs. staff—the options are free vs. consult fee paid in advance vs. fee paid in advance to be applied to future procedure
- A pre-consult phone call with patient coordinator or nurse may be helpful
- Intake forms, general health/surgical history, consent for consultation should be completed before the meeting and secured in patient chart

- Provide specific instructions for photographs of areas to be discussed for prior submission
- Set time limit for initial virtual meeting; 30 minutes is typical
- Limit the consultation to the patient only, or if under 18 years old, the patient and parent
- It may be wise to avoid any discussion of fees and have staff follow up to explain the details; fees for procedures discussed, pre procedure instructions, timeline for scheduling, etc.

Virtual visits are also being used for follow-ups for surgical and non-surgical procedures, to triage potential complications and address patient concerns, as well as touch base checks for skincare patients.

Many plastic surgeons I know in the US and EU have effectively integrated virtual visits since COVID-19. This provides an efficient and convenient solution for patient communication that can facilitate deeper connections over time. Think of it as an important step to future-proof your practice and remain competitive in the marketplace.

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